Costanza Candeloro interviews Chris Korda for Terraforma Journal, May 9, 2022

In a very beautiful article written by French artist Lily Raynaud Dewar for Text Zur Kunst Chris Korda is described as a *“techno musician, an environmental and antinatalist activist, has identified as transgender since 1991, and has been the Reverend of the Church of Euthanasia since 1992. The Church of Euthanasia is (or was? I don’t know how active the Church is now) “a non-profit educational foundation devoted to restoring balance between Humans and the remaining species on Earth,” and its founding ideology is “Thou Shalt not Procreate.” The Church has produced a vast array of political activism material: sermons, street propaganda, protests, tracts, participation in TV shows (like The Jerry Springer Show, for instance) and a website that, very early on (for the internet, that is), was used as an educational and proselytizing media platform, with a quarterly PDF journal, videos, music, interviews, etc. “*

The article proceeds by relating Chris to Donna Haraway *“I found strategies similar to that of Korda’s: emphasis, exaggeration, exacerbation, theatricality; all were put in use in order to de-essentialize, or de-purify, or complicate gender and political activism.*

I studied at Geneva’s Art School, in the same years when Lily was a Master's professor. It was also in Geneva that I met Claire Van Lubeek, the student and artist that Lily mentioned in the article when she said she didn't dare disturb Chris ‘cause she was apparently inactive. The time-frame of this inactivity seems to have run from 2004 to 2019.

In 2020, the year in which the article in question was also written, her LP 'Apologize to the the future' - to which the article itself is dedicated - came out.

“Apologize to the Future” is the first album entirely devoted to the pivotal issues of the 21st century: climate change, economic inequality, intergenerational injustice, anti-natalism, the singularity, and human extinction. The album is electro-rap with techno and jazz influences, and packed with heartfelt, grief-stricken rhymes sung by a robotic choir. The central theme is that future generations—should they exist—will bitterly resent us for leaving them a wrecked planet. Korda excoriates the selfishness and solipsism of present generations, and describes the album’s “militant existentialism” as an urgent antidote to the post-truth era’s “alternative facts.”

A few months later through Illicit Bookshop - a project linked to books and publishing that I run together with Francesca Ciccone - we got in touch with Chris. We were interested in editing one of her texts.

One of the things that struck me the most was that her texts - like a machine - manage to re-establish meaning even if parts are missing or the words-order and sequencing is changed.

This April 2022, however, Chris released his album 'Passion for Numbers', which seems to be a completely different project from ‘Apologize for the future’.

Chris Could you tell us a little bit about this album? Why did you get interested in writing for solo piano instead for dance music sound?

“Passion for Numbers” is an album of solo piano music that further develops concepts I introduced on my previous album “Polymeter.” Like all of my musical output since 2019, it’s in complex polymeter (see below), but I also developed new polymeter modulation types especially for this album. It also makes use of method ringing and Gray code, explanations of which can be found online.

The album reflects my increasing interest in atonal music. In 2016 I began systematically teaching myself atonality, using Paul Nelson’s composer tools as a starting point. In atonality, traditional musical elements such as scales, chords and cadences are eschewed in favor of a branch of math called musical set theory. Conventional harmony consists of a few well-known chords, arranged in familiar sequences called cadences, with each chord resolving more or less predictably to its successor. This traditional paradigm is vertical, like the bar lines in sheet music. Atonal music in comparison uses the full range of 240 possible tonalities (of which the commonly used scales comprise a mere two percent) and the tonalities needn’t be exclusive or arranged into familiar patterns of tension and resolution. Instead it’s normal to explore tense, ambiguous tonality, and to develop harmony horizontally, highlighting overlap, gradation and evolution, often by iterating through all the permutations of a set of notes. I experience atonal composing as more similar to color field painting, for example the work of Leon Berkowitz. Atonality is also extremely number-oriented even by music theory standards, which makes it a perfect fit for my numerate and algorithmic approach to art.

I’m increasingly writing for piano and traditional orchestral instruments such as strings because these timbres are ideal for rendering tense, ambiguous tonality. Orchestral instruments have persisted for centuries in part because their sonic characteristics have proved to be so fruitful for the advancement of harmony. By comparison, the synthesizers ubiquitous in dance music are overly simplistic and emphasize odd harmonics. They’re fine for superficial structures like looped modal vamps, but they’re unsuitable for sophisticated tonal evolution, because they obliterate subtle harmonic details. Writing complex harmony for such crass timbres is as pointless as playing a Bill Evans record through a fuzz box.

How did you approach the idea that someone could use it as background piano music?

“Passion for Numbers” was constructed using genuinely novel techniques, a rare occurrence that demands the listener’s full attention. Its uniqueness makes it a challenging experience, even with musical training and complete concentration. Unless you’re familiar with my previous work, you have literally never heard anything like it before, and if you think you have, it’s because you’re not hearing it properly. Friends have told me that they had to listen to the album repeatedly before its rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structures became apparent, and I’m not surprised. It’s a new type of music, and it requires a new way of hearing.

My favorite architect Eero Saarinen famously said “The purpose of architecture is to shelter and enhance man's life on earth and to fulfill his belief in the nobility of his existence,” and I feel similarly about musical composition. This isn’t a vaudeville show or a burlesque act. I’m not here to titillate or pander to popular taste. I’m here to express my artistic vision as faithfully as possible, and thereby inspire others to realize the beauty and reverence of a knowledge-centric life.

Considering that part of your creations are texts and that music production can be seen as a process that involves 'writing', in a more or less direct way. Have you ever thought of your whole ouvre as a hybridisation between the two?

My music isn’t written; on the contrary, it’s generated by an elaborate system of rules, called a polymeter modulation network. More abstractly, I build a kinetic sculpture, and the sculpture’s “motion” outputs my music automatically. The sculpture is virtual, meaning it lacks physicality and exists only as data within my Polymeter MIDI sequencer. My sequencer is effectively an artificial intelligence that I collaborate with, like a robot. My robot and I are equals, in the sense that it can do many things that I can’t, and vice versa. For example, it supplies speed and thoroughness, whereas I supply intention and emotion. I spend a lot of time listening to my robot generate music according to preset rules, and paradoxically, it often surprises me. The system has enough degrees of freedom to allow emergent properties and unexpected behavior, and the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. I didn’t write “Passion for Numbers” and could never have written it, because I don’t understand it. I understand the systems I used to generate it, but that’s not the same thing.

A custom music composition software invented by you called “ The Polymeter - MIDI sequencer” was involved in the making of this album. What connection there is between this tool, its conception, its operation and writing?

My music is generally in complex polymeter, meaning it’s not just in odd time, but in multiple odd time signatures, and not one odd time signature after another sequentially, but all of them running concurrently. A complex polymeter composition simultaneously uses at least three different loop lengths which are relatively prime, meaning they share no common factors except 1. Such collections of loops gradually drift in and out of synchronization relative to each other, forming intricate patterns known as interference. This is very different from how music is normally constructed, which explains why I needed to develop custom software tools to compose my music with.

Most of the tracks on “Passion for Numbers” combine 4, 5, 6, and 7. I call this setup 420, because 420 is the smallest number evenly divisible by 4, 5, 6, and 7. I think of it as 12 groups of 35. I usually measure loop lengths in sixteenth notes, but they’re more traditionally expressed in quarter notes, in which case this setup could alternatively be called 105/4 time. At a typical tempo, 105/4 time repeats its pattern in roughly a minute, which is long enough to be interesting, but short enough to be comprehensible. So there’s a reason to appreciate the number 420 that’s completely unrelated to cannabis.

The most obvious way to combine polymeter loops is to simply juxtapose them, but this is only the beginning of the road. Mastery comes from polymeter modulation, wherein a loop varies some property of another loop. Even the earliest versions of my sequencer supported one loop “gating” another, also known as mute modulation, but the current version supports a dozen types of modulation. For details, see the user manual, which is freely available, like the sequencer itself. They’re both easily found by searching for Polymeter MIDI Sequencer.

Through your experimentations with software you have invented an entire musical genre called "complex polymeter", meaning many different odd time signatures are used simultaneously. Could you explain to us the genesis of this process and how it has evolved over the years?

I discovered polymeter by accident in 1992, because the software MIDI sequencer I was using at that time (DOS Cakewalk) had a loop length setting for each track. This meant that tracks could loop completely independently of each other. I quickly grasped that by combining relatively prime loop lengths, it’s possible to generate arbitrarily long, deterministic (non-random) patterns that can sound eerily similar to the embellishments of a live performer. One of my early experiments was a set of 21 loops, each containing a single unique note, with lengths ranging from 1 to 21. The composition is called “Tarot” and you can find it on my Bandcamp page.

My fascination with polymeter derives from at least two childhood influences: popular music in odd time signatures, and exposure to the work of kinetic sculptors such as Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely, and especially Thomas Wilfred. Odd time signatures were inescapable in the 1970s. It wasn’t only progressive and psychedelic rock bands like Yes and The Grateful Dead. Odd time was also used in pop hits (Pink Floyd “Money”), jazz standards (“Take Five”), Broadway shows (“Jesus Chris Superstar”), and TV themes (“Mission Impossible”). The first usage of polymeter I ever heard was “Long Distance Runaround” by Yes (drums in 5/8, band in 4/4). Kinetic sculpture was also having its heyday in the 1970s. Calder’s mobiles were the height of fashion. I first encountered Thomas Wilfred’s “Lumia” machines in the Museum of Modern Art, and he gets my vote for patron saint of phase art. Look him up in Wikipedia.

Your album “Apologize to the Future” is also entirely in complex polymeter. As I mentioned in the introduction, it addresses some very specific issues. How did you use the elements that make it up - titles, videos, lyrics - to express these urgencies?

An advantage of using odd time is that lyrics can be set to music in novel ways. For example “Singularity” is primarily in 11, which allows for very long lines. “Overshoot” is primarily in 27, which gives it an aggressive, relentless feel. I fit the music to the mood and rhythm of the lyrics, not the other way around. I wrote the lyrics first, sometimes months before starting work on the music.

Your retrospective “The (wo)man of the Future, Chris Korda, une rétrospective” will open on 10 June at "Le Confort Moderne" in Poitiers. Could you tell us how the exhibition will be organized? What materials will be present?

The show is being curated by Coralie Ruiz and Anthony Stephinson. Unlike previous exhibitions which focused exclusively on The Church of Euthanasia, this show covers all aspects of my work, including video, music, installations, performance, digital and algorithmic art, texts, graphic design, photography, artifacts, and many surprises.

How have you expressed yourself and your practice in exhibition spaces and museums over the years?

Showings have been rare and controversial. Notable examples include Trans Sexual Express (Centre D'Art de Santa Mònica, Barcelona, June 2001), and The Church of Euthanasia Archives (Goswell Road, Paris, April 2019).

I have a personal question - from 2004 to 2019 you were apparently musically inactive - and to me it has always been a kind of mythical productive hole - If you feel comfortable in sharing I'd like to ask you what happened in those years?

During this period I released three significant phase compositions: "Al Fasawz" (2003), "I'll Just Die If I Don't Get This Recipe" (2005), and "Plasmagon" (2009), all three of which are freely available on chriskorda.com. Each of these constitutes a radical development of my technique. During this period I also developed many free software applications, including a sound-collage instrument (Mixere), two VJ softwares (Whorld and FFRend), an audio editor (WaveShop), and ChordEase, a meta-instrument that makes it easier to play improvisational music that switches scales frequently (such as jazz). I wrote a paper about ChordEase, and presented it at the 2015 NIME Conference. Throughout this period I also played piano in a jazz trio called The Enronettes, which you can find on archive.org. But most importantly, during this period I worked as a consultant for the 3D printing industry, which obliged me to learn many new engineering skills, including object-oriented design, advanced Windows programming, and parallel processing. These skills were essential to the redevelopment of my Polymeter MIDI Sequencer, starting in 2016.

My absence from the European scene is also traceable to the bankruptcy of Europe's largest electronic music distributor (EFA) in 2004. EFA took many labels down with it, including the one I had been releasing on, International DJ Gigolo. As a result, the release of my second album ("The Man of the Future") was badly botched, and my already paltry musical income dried up altogether. It's also fair to say that by 2004, the Electroclash genre which I had helped launch was no longer innovative, and I had lost interest in hanging around discotheques in the middle of the night.

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